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AUTHOR Russell-Robinson, Joyce
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ABSTRACT

A course taught at St. Augustine's College uses "A Voice from the South" (1893) by Anna J. Cooper (a collection of essays representing women as being bold, in-charge decision makers) as an example of how "Feminism across the Disciplines" is expressed. These essays, as well as works of a number of other writers, can be used in developing interdisciplinary writing assignments. Opportunities for vocabulary building, comparing a 19th century man's curriculum with a 19th century woman's curriculum, and comparing Cooper's ideas with those of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in an excerpt from "The Communist Manifesto" are all examples of interdisciplinary assignments which enable students to more openly participate in a liberal arts education. (RS)

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Feminism Across the Disciplines
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by Joyce Russell-Robinson

St. Augustines's College

Raleigh, North Carolina

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After submitting the topic "Feminism Across the Disciplines", I immediately realized that I would need to clarify the term, simply because feminism means different things to different people. For some individuals feminism means empowering women so that they may compete with men on an equal basis while for others, particulary for those in the academy, feminism might mean introducing and keeping alive texts written by women authors. Then, of course, there are some African-American culture, and terms that Alice Walker uses to describe her brand of feminism. When a Black woman describes herself as a womanist, she more or less means what Walker says, precisely, that as a womanist, she appreciates and admires other women. But perhaps a more fundamental component of womanism is that the womanist is bold, in charge, and does not shrink from making important decisions that relate to her life.

I need next to explain how this concept is applied across the disciplines. And for this purpose I refer to A Voice From the South (1893) by Anna J. Cooper. This is a collection of essays which I think exhibit a great amount of boldness, and many examples of a woman being in charge and making

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important decisions about her life. Before telling what methodology I employ in teaching this text, however, I would like to comment on a few of the essays in this collection. Whenever I teach A Voice from the South, I am always careful to include an essay called "The Higher Education of Women", primarily because our institution vigorously promotes teacher education, and because we have a course that we call the History of Education. In this essay, "The Higher Education of Women", Cooper is brave enough to openly criticize St. Augustine's College and the institution's practice of steering women into what in the nineteenth century was call the "Ladies' Course". This was a curriculum that included no courses in theology or the classics--courses that Cooper and some other women would have found intellectually stimulating. Women were expected to learn things that would better equip them to be mothers and domestics. Cooper indicates in this essay that intellectual development, which she strongly endorses, leads to self-reliance. In her own words,

> Intellectual development...renders a woman less dependent on the marriage relation for physical support. And intellectual development allows a woman to know that she is not compelled to look to sexual love as the one sensation capable of giving tone and relish, movement and vim to the life she leads. (68-69)

Cooper's womanism can be seen again in an essay which she titles "The Gain from a Belief". She is very womanish in that she dares to question the very existence of God. She boldly asserts that "If there be a God--He is unknown and unknowable. The finite mind of man cannot conceive the Infinite and Eternal"(289). Here it seems that Cooper has something in common with

David Hume in that both are reluctant to say what does exist in our world, and reluctant to accept that absolute knowledge can be attained from the external world. Hence, Cooper can be called a skeptic in the philosophical sense. There are many other examples of Cooper's womanism. For instance, in A Voice she criticixes William Dean Howells and other males, among them, Booker T. Washington.

Now that I have introduced you to Anna J. Cooper and A Voice from the South, I would like to tell you exactly what I do with the text. First, I assist student in exploring the text through an examination of Cooper's language. Of particular interest is the abundance of foreign expressions, including names from Greek mythology. Calling attention to such terms is an excellent way to build vocabulary while also teaching Greek mythology.

Secondly, I make writing assignments that are interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary. From the essay on the higher education of women, for example, students might be asked to write a paper comparing a nineteenth-century man's curriculum with a nineteenth-century woman's curriculum. Such an assignment clearly touches upon the discipline of history.

And from a more theoretical basis, there are opportunities to make assignments that relate to dialectical materialism or Marxist thought. In an essay titled "What Are We Worth?" Cooper states that labor is the most important possession that human beings own. In this instance students are asked to compare Cooper's ideas with those of Marx and Engels in an excerpt from The Communist Manifesto. An alternate choice would be excerpts from

Engels's The Condition of the Working Class in England. (Such excerpts are normally available in certain anthologies that are used in other English classes.)

Above everything else, I encourage students to recognize the interdisciplinary connections that exist in A Voice from the South. Recognition of these connections enables students to more openly receive the liberal arts education that St. Augustine's College offers to them.

In the brief time that I have been before you, I hope that I have been successful in giving you an idea of what we mean when we at St. Augustine's College use the expression "Feminism across the Disciplines". I have used as an example Ann J. Cooper to demonstrate how I proceed in my courses though are a large number of other women writers would be equally useful. Through the years I have found that the works of individuals such as Toni Morrison, Kate Chopin, and Mary Wollstonecraft all lend themselves to good interdisciplinary teaching. But certainly one of the best writers for this kind of instruction is Charlotte Perkins Gilman--feminist, sociologist, and economist.